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SUBJECT: CORRECTED COPY: BHARAT BALLOT 09: CASTE AND  
PERSONALITY DOMINATE IN BELLWETHER UTTAR PRADESH

REF: BHARAT BALLOT SERIES

Corrected for Spelling of Party/Candidate Names

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. A visit to six constituencies in an arc along the western border of bellwether Uttar Pradesh revealed that caste, personality politics, and tactical voting dominate over national issues as the region went to the polls May 7. Results of all parliamentary contests across the country will be declared on May 16. The caste-based strategies of the regional parties made communal issues the dominant dynamic in candidate selection and campaigning in most constituencies. Contacts across the political spectrum believed that the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) both stood to make modest gains in Uttar Pradesh, even though these contacts had difficulty identifying any national issues that would help turn the voter towards the national parties. Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) seemed to be riding her loyal and transferable Dalit support to gains within Uttar Pradesh at the expense of the faltering Samajwadi Party (SP). One thing is certain: the next Indian government will be determined not by national issues but rather by an impossibly complex landscape of local and caste dynamics best understood by pulling back the curtain to peer into individual races. END SUMMARY.

General Trends: Caste Matters  
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12. (SBU) A visit to six constituencies in an arc along the western border of bellwether Uttar Pradesh -- from Delhi through Mathura, tourist hot-spots of Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, across the Scindia family stronghold of Gwalior in neighboring Madhya Pradesh to Jhansi in the clubbed foot of Uttar Pradesh's Bundelkhand region -- revealed that caste, personality politics, and tactical voting dominated over national issues as the region went to the polls May 7. Votes will be counted and results declared on May 16.

13. (SBU) In general, the more competitive the candidates from the powerful regional parties -- Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP) -- the less important were national issues in the campaigns. The caste-based strategies of the regional parties made communal issues the dominant dynamic in candidate selection and campaign performance in most constituencies. One Muslim contact observed that India remains a young democracy; religion has faded as a defining issue in politics, but caste

is still deeply entrenched and sentimental.

¶4. (SBU) Despite the communal character of the campaigns, contacts across the political spectrum believed that the national parties -- the Congress Party and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the latter contesting in Uttar Pradesh in partnership with the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) -- both stood to gain seats in Uttar Pradesh, partly because voters tended to view parliamentary elections as more national in character. Nevertheless, contacts had difficulty identifying national issues of concern in the races. Even in the tourist hot-spots of Agra and Fatehpur Sikri, where declining numbers of visitors might be blamed in part on the 26/11 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, contacts attributed the lull instead to the global economic slow-down. When pressed to describe national issues that resonated locally, contacts vaguely mentioned development, which seemed to be shorthand for benefits extracted from the political system by their caste and community leadership.

¶5. (SBU) An Electoral Commission decree prohibiting posters and billboards resulted in few overt signs of the vigorous election campaigns. Contacts agreed that the parties were effectively reaching voters through public meetings and rallies, speeches, door-to-door canvassing, and electronic outreach (mainly mobile phone text messaging). Some contacts expressed concern that the lack of advertisements together with high summer temperatures would result in a lower voter turnout overall, tending to favor the BSP's committed Dalit voters and the BJP's fervent upper caste Hindutva base. These factors may also mitigate against a groundswell of

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youth voting. However, a respectable preliminary turnout of 50 percent on May 7, compared to 48 percent in 2004, belied some of these fears. Professors at the Jhansi College of Science and Engineering reported that although 43 percent of the population in that constituency was between the ages of 18 and 35, young voters had not mobilized as a voting block, tending instead to vote with their families.

Mayawati's Dalits: Loyal ... and Transferable

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¶6. (SBU) Overall, contacts generally agreed that the national parties would increase their seats in Uttar Pradesh, while Mayawati's BSP would gain at the expense of the faltering Samajwadi Party (SP). Of Uttar Pradesh's 80 Parliamentary seats, BSP (19) and SP (35) combined won 54 seats in 2004. This time, the two parties together are expected to tally at least 5-10 fewer seats. Senior SP officials and those close to them remain formidable, but their "socialist" party is increasingly viewed as the party of opportunism and corruption.

¶7. (SBU) Mayawati's strategy is based on her Dalit vote base, which is not only loyal but also -- crucially -- transferable. Lower caste BSP supporters not only reliably turn out to vote for fellow Dalits, but also follow Mayawati's instructions and vote for whoever she tells them to vote for, including Brahmin candidates. This allows her to field upper caste candidates in some constituencies to attract support away from traditional Congress or BJP voters.

The BJP-RLD alliance employs a similar caste-based strategy unifying other caste voters (such as the prosperous Jats farmers) with the BJP's core upper caste constituents, a strategy that could pick up as many as 20 seats for the alliance in Uttar Pradesh, up smartly from the 10 seats it won in 2004.

Congress and Muslims: Don't Call It a Comeback...

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¶8. (SBU) Most remarkably, the Congress Party appeared to have a chance to make a modest come-back in the state home to the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty and its bastion of power. Congress

held only nine seats in Uttar Pradesh in the previous Parliament, and appeared at one time to be losing in most of them. However, strong candidates and the disillusionment of the Muslim vote with SP and its mistrust of BSP appeared to give Congress a reasonable chance of prevailing in as many as 15 to 20 constituencies.

¶9. (SBU) Muslim contacts uniformly told us that their community prefers Congress, but will support whoever seems most likely to beat the BJP. For instance, Agra's substantial Muslim community previously had no problem voting for former BJP Prime Minister Atul Bihari Vajpayee, who was seen as the moderate face of the BJP, but they do not trust the party's current candidate for Prime Minister L.K. Advani, who rose to prominence on strict Hindutva credentials. Likewise, prominent Muslims in Fatehpur Sikri told us that their community had turned to the surging SP in recent years to keep the BJP out of power, but is now returning to the Congress, as well as considering the BSP where it appears more likely to beat the BJP.

All Politics Is Local: Anecdotal Evidence From Six Constituencies

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¶10. (SBU) The next Indian government will be determined by issues of caste, personality, and tactics. These dynamics are perhaps best illustrated by pulling back the curtain to peer into individual races, such as those described in paragraphs 11-16.

¶11. (SBU) Mathura hosted a triangular contest between Jayant Chaudhary (BJP-RLD), Shyam Sunder Sharma (BSP), and sitting member of parliament Manvendra Singh (Congress). The BJP-RLD nominee's chances look brightest. Chaudhary is the grandson of former Prime Minister Chaudhary Charan Singh, drawing

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cross-over support from Congress Party voters, including the sitting state assembly legislator from the Congress Party. He commands a large block of votes from his fellow Jat caste farmers, reinforced by the absence of an SP candidate competing for a similar vote block. The BJP alliance also contributes committed Hindutva voters to the ticket in a pious constituency famous as the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Krishna. The Congress candidate is also a Jat, so the two could split the vote block creating an opportunity for the BSP candidate. However, party representatives (including from the Congress) shared that voters like the Congress Party, but not the incumbent, who was elected on a development platform, but spent much of his time in Delhi and accomplished little in the constituency.

¶12. (SBU) Agra witnessed a tight race between sitting member of parliament Ramji Lal Suman (SP) and Ram Shankar (BJP-RLD), with Kunwar Singh Wakil (BSP) and Prabhu Dayal Katheria (Congress) described by local contacts as weaker candidates. The delimitation of parliamentary constituencies in 2008 made Agra a reserved constituency, in which by law only members of Scheduled Castes can stand for election. As a result, lower caste voters will likely divide almost equally among the candidates, leaving the support of other castes and Muslims decisive. Many Muslims in the constituency had supported BJP in the past under former Prime Minister Vajpay, but they do not share the same comfort level with Advani, leaving them divided among BSP, SP, and Congress. This is the first time Agra is a reserved constituency, so the upper castes may lack enthusiasm to select among lower caste candidates, decreasing turnout.

¶13. (SBU) Fatehpur Sikri was previously a reserved constituency, but has been redesignated a general constituency, drawing strong high caste candidates from neighboring Agra. Fatehpur Sikri is one of the most closely-contested seats. Sitting member of parliament from neighboring Agra Raj Babbar (Congress) is counting on his

popularity as a former film star and the youth vote. Wife of the Uttar Pradesh Energy Minister in Mayawati's cabinet Seema Upadhyaya (BSP) is counting on BSP's loyal lower caste vote together with support from her fellow Brahmins. Ari Daman Singh (BJP-RLD) hails from a prominent feudal family and is viewed as having done a lot for the area as a minister in the previous BJP governments in the state. Raghuraj Sing Shakya (SP) is perhaps the weakest in strong field, despite three terms as member of parliament from a constituency that disappeared due to redrawing of district boundaries.

¶14. (SBU) Hathras is a reserved constituency with a triangular contest between Sarika Singh (BJP-RLD), Rajendra Kumar (BSP), and Anar Singh (SP), with Pradeep Chandel (Congress) rounding out the ballot. The BJP-RLD candidate draws from her large RLD Jatav caste vote block, supplemented with upper caste voters gained through the alliance with BJP.

Faced with a strong BJP-affiliated candidate, local Muslims are divided on how best to avert a BJP victory, splitting their support between BSP and SP and leaving the Congress candidate out of contention. Muslim contacts told us that local mosques would try to unify the Muslim vote the Friday before the May 7 vote.

¶15. (SBU) Ferozabad witnessed a direct contest between the SP and BSP candidates. Akhilesh Yadav (SP) is the son of SP President Mulayam Singh Yadav, who commands respect and votes across the lower castes. The strength of S.P. Singh Baghel (BSP) lies in his Rajput caste vote block combined with the BSP's vote block in a constituency where the majority of voters are from lower castes. Raghubar Dayal Verma, a former SP leader contesting on behalf of BJP-RLD, and Rajendra Pal (Congress) round out the ballot.

¶16. (SBU) Jhansi saw a four-cornered contest between strong candidates. Sitting member of parliament Chandra Pal Singh (SP) is a close associate of SP President Mulayam Singh Yadav. Ramesh Kumar Shukla (BSP) is a Brahmin; Mayawati hopes she can deliver the loyal Dalit vote and Shukla can lure the upper caste vote away from the BJP-RLD. Pradeep Jain (Congress) is a young and popular sitting state assembly

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legislator who in 2007 defeated Shukla, the BJP-RLD candidate, for that position partly by commanding the votes of Jhansi's large Jain community. In a constituency which was in the middle of a 113 degree plus heat wave, low turnout could favor BSP and BJP, both of which have more committed voters bases. Apart from caste and personality politics, voters are concerned about development and the prospect of statehood for Uttar Pradesh's neglected Bundelkhand region. A group of interlocutors including science and engineering professors said poverty and unemployment are concerns, but they tended to be viewed through the lens of caste.  
BURLEIGH